



Flight instructor, 2 students found dead

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By RICHARD BROOKS, ELENA ARNOLD and PAUL LaROCCO / The Press-Enterprise

YUCAIPA - A flight instructor and two men from Japan who were practicing to become commercial pilots died in the wreckage of a Redlands-based airplane found Tuesday on a ridgeline above Yucaipa, authorities said.

Owned by MI Air flight school, the four-seat Piper Archer disappeared Monday after taking off at 6:30 p.m. from Redlands Municipal Airport for what was planned as a 90-minute flight to practice nighttime takeoffs and landings at both San Bernardino International and Redlands airports.

The crash site is a mountain about 10 miles southeast of Redlands airport, said Lt. Col. Ron Butts of the Civil Air Patrol.

"It's not a very big mountain, but it's big enough," Butts said.

Names of the dead were withheld until families are notified. Authorities said that the flight instructor was from Half Moon Bay in Central California and the two students were visiting from Japan.

"They had their private pilots licenses," said Butts. "They were working on their instrument and commercial ratings."

PLANE CRASH

The training flight left Redlands airport at 6:30 p.m. Monday

The plane was reported missing at 9:30 a.m. Tuesday

Two Yucaipa residents spotted the wreckage at 1:30 p.m.



Carrie Rosema / The Press-Enterprise

A plane that had been reported missing Tuesday, at right, is one of six owned by MI Air. The two students who died in the crash had been training at the school for seven months.

The two advance ratings are steppingstones to a career as an airline pilot.

The 12-year-old flight school trains many Japanese students, said owner Masa Mitsutomi. Commercial pilot training is less available and more expensive in Japan, which has a comparatively limited airspace, he said.

In the United States, Japanese students can learn English as they earn their flight ratings, Butts said.

The single-engine, 180-horsepower Piper was reported missing at 9:30 a.m. Tuesday by a flight school employee.

The Civil Air Patrol began its search two hours later with two ground crews from Chino and Van Nuys, and two airplanes based at Big Bear and Van Nuys.

But the crash-activated emergency radio beacon aboard the plane apparently failed to go off and a preliminary check showed that the pilot had made no distress call to air traffic controllers, officials said.

"There was one person (aboard) who has a cell phone, but they're not answering," CAP Capt. Andrea Binder said during the search.

At 1:30 p.m., a Yucaipa teenager and her mother phoned the San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department and reported seeing a plane atop a hill above their home.

A sheriff's helicopter crew confirmed that it was the missing plane.

Peering through binoculars Tuesday afternoon, Ehren McLarty, 15, had been scanning the brush-covered hillside.

"I was looking for a bird we'd seen this morning," she said.

The twisted white wreckage with red and blue trim stood out among the olive-green brush and rust-colored boulders.

"At first I thought it was a pile of rocks," she said.

"Then we saw the tail," added her mother, Traudy McLarty, "and we knew it was a plane."

It was the first plane crash the family has seen on the hillsides that span the northern edge of the rural city. They have lived there for eight years.

"We've seen fires, but never something like this," Traudy McLarty said.

After the crash was confirmed, the Redlands flight school was hectic but hushed. A handful of students gathered in the lobby, filling each other in on what had happened.

"I just got here, and it's not a very good mood," said flight student Adam Emmons.

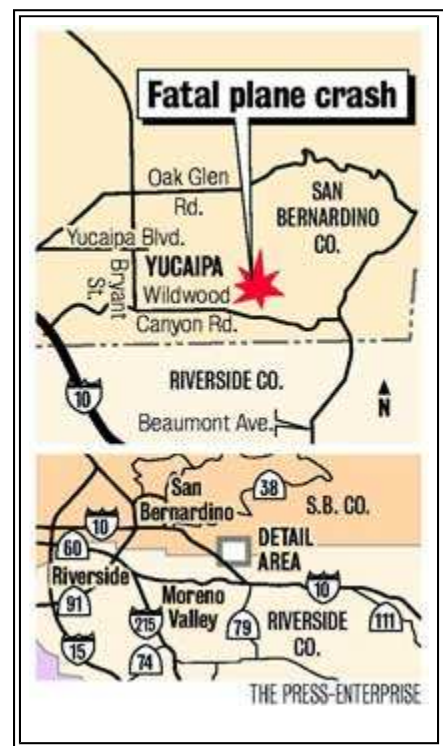
The ill-fated plane was among the school's six aircraft -- but the only one Emmons has flown.

He spoke well of the plane, but said its low-wing design limits a pilot's downward visibility.

"That's why I like to fly in the daytime," Emmons said. "You can see the mountains coming."

The two students who died in the crash had been training at the school for about seven months, said Matt Dobbs, the operations manager.

The instructor had been working at the school about a month.



"He was a good instructor," Dobbs said. "Masa (Mitsutomi) checked him out personally."

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